

Moran Introduces Legislation to Bring Physicians to Underserved Communities

Legislation Permanently Reauthorizes Physician Recruitment Program

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Congressmen Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Earl Pomeroy (D-ND) recently introduced legislation to permanently reauthorize a program to recruit physicians to practice in underserved areas. The J-1 visa waiver program, set to expire on June 1, 2006, allows foreign-born, U.S.-educated physicians to serve in areas that have a shortage of physicians.

"For many rural hospitals and clinics across the country, this program is the only way patients are able to have access to an experienced, qualified doctor," Moran said. "This waiver program has been successful not only in Kansas, but across the country. Reauthorization would allow us to continue improving access to health care."

The J-1 visa waiver program allows international medical graduates to stay in the U.S. in exchange for three years of practicing in areas experiencing a shortage of doctors. Since 1994,

115 foreign doctors have served in Kansas communities through this program, and 67 physicians, or 58 percent, have remained in practice in the state following the completion of their three-year service obligation.

"Physician recruitment is always a challenge, even more so in rural communities," said Myron Applequist, Director of Medical Staff Development at Hays Medical Center. "The J-1 visa waiver program has helped us level the playing field and recruit some outstanding physicians to our community."

Under the program, states are allowed to sponsor up to 30 doctors per year. Kansas allows visa waivers for 15 primary care physicians and 15 specialists. Primary care physicians include general medicine, internal medicine, family practice, general pediatrics, obstetrics/gynecology, emergency medicine and psychiatry.

"The state of Kansas has come to rely on the willingness of both U.S. and foreign physicians to practice in underserved areas," said Howard Rodenberg, Director of the Division of Health at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. "The J-1 visa waiver program is a big plus for communities that have been unable to find a U.S. physician interested in these opportunities. When access to medical care improves for underserved Kansas communities, it is a good trade."

Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS) and

Kent Conrad (D-ND).

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